

Sheep Ranchers Tend To Become Hysterical Over Shearing Problems

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MERTZON — These people out here are going to make themselves sick worrying over the oncoming shearing season. The coffee houses are filled with hombres moaning about such minor anticipated hardships as the overall shortage of cash and extra labor, or the steady increase of shearing costs falling in line with the minute increases in the wool market.

The wailing grows louder each day. As reports come in of sheep shearers becoming as scarce as budget-minded politicians, the crying increases. Many more days of this and there won't be a herder left with the strength to get out of bed, much less with the stamina that shearing is going to take.

One grower called our ranch this morning, carrying on in a big way about having to get his shearing contractor out of jail last night, so he could start to work today. You never heard such bellowing. From the way he was describing the incident, you'd have thought the capitan had deliberately got crosswise with the law and that he was the first patron in the history of sheepdom to have to leave his bed to raise a few hundred dollars jail money.

He knew better than that. Nocturnal financial aid to ranch help has been part of the judicial system for ages. In the ranching country, boss and bondsman has always been synonymous. The very foundation for settling employes' disagreements with public order (I speak of husband and wife slug-outs, barroom fracas, knife and gun toting charges, etc.) has traditionally been the responsibility of the employer. That'll never change.

Now it is agreed that had the facts of this particular case been given a more thorough examination by the prosecutors, the capitan would have kept his liberty and the rancher wouldn't have lost any sleep.

You see, the contractor was fixing to start shearing for a group of herders who are well known for being severe critics of the modern shearing operation. The sight of wool being packed like a sailor's sea bag is all it takes to make them explode. Shearers leaving gates open or smothering down sheep never escape their wrath. The sergeant at arms at the United Nations would be shocked at the way they blow up over crippled or cut up ewes.

With that in mind, imagine the amount of emotional pressure that was building up in the shearing boss as he contemplated the next 30 days of constant criticism. Think how lost and forlorn he must have felt as he stood at the bar (the alleged overuse of alcohol is the basis of the State's charges) and thought of the long days ahead, whip-stitching eight-inch gashes while an angry client made unreasonable remarks about the wool being scattered in four directions.

Had the magistrate been aware of that evidence, he would have pardoned the poor man. Running a shearing machine has broken many a strong willed fellow.

The books aren't open to bets on whether the flocks will be sheared this year in the Shortgrass Country. The wildest odd-takers don't want a part of anything as risky as sheep ranching.

Bookies aren't the only ones who are shying away from the game. Sheep numbers are the lowest since the 1880's. A lot of folks must be turning to safer ventures, like financing horse players or underwriting deep sea treasure hunting schemes. People can be mighty fickle about where they invest their money. Just let 30 years of bad times hit an industry and nobody has any faith in it.

As it is this week, shearing is the big topic of conversation. The whole populace is far too worried. They'd better all be careful or they'll end up shipwrecked like the capitan did. I wonder who would rescue a sheepman if he became legally marooned in town?